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Star-Ledger- September 21, 2009

By Bob Braun

WASHINGTON -- He sits at his desk, staring unhappily at the long list of names and telephone numbers printed on the papers before him. He punches in one number after another, but many of his calls are answered by voice mail. He is annoyed.

"No one wants to answer the phone," he said.

John Adler, the freshman congressman from New Jersey's 3rd Congressional district, looks across at the young woman sitting on the other side of the desk.

"Shouldn't I be going to the meeting with the controller of the currency?" Adler asked. Her name is Jill Greco and, while she's not yet 30, she is his chief of staff.

"I prefer you do this," said Greco, with a smiling yet authoritative tone. They both know who's boss -- Adler is -- but what isn't yet known is whose advice and whose instincts should be followed so early in a congressman's career.

Adler is one of two freshman congressmen in the New Jersey delegation. The other is Leonard Lance, a Republican. They were both leaders in the New Jersey Legislature.

Lance replaced a retiring Republican, Mike Ferguson, in the 7th District. Adler also took a seat held by a retiring Republican, Jim Saxton. But Adler is a Democrat -- the first Democrat to hold that area of South Jersey in a century.

Lance won by nearly 25,000 - Adler, by 10,000.

No one in the office -- least of all Adler himself -- discusses the closeness of the race last November or its link to his decision (or Greco's) to stay in his office calling local officials rather than to go to a meeting of the House Financial Services committee to hear John Dugan, the controller of the currency, talk about the future of banks.

No one needs to. Adler is a "frontline" Democrat, the potentially besieged holder of a normally Republican seat whose re-election next year is a top priority, not just to Adler himself, but to congressional leaders.

His staff is aware of this. Despite youth -- most, like Greco, are under 30 -- they know what sort of congressman he needs to be right now. Adler responds by listening to their advice -- and even turning over most of the physical space of his office to his staff.

"There's only one of me, but five of them," says Adler. His smallish Longworth office also serves as sleeping quarters when he doesn't go home to Cherry Hill.

Adler makes the calls because he wants to be helpful to local officials -- "Just let me know how I can be helpful to you" or "If you ever need me, here's my cell number" are two favorite lines to mayors and council members. He also he wants to be known as a conservative Democrat.

"I am the most conservative Democrat in the New Jersey delegation," says Adler, on his way to a meeting of the House Financial Services Committee, where he proves it by voting against the chairman, Barney Frank of Massachusetts, on three Republican-sponsored amendments involving federally subsidized housing for the poor.

Adler votes to limit the number of new housing units. He votes to ensure the immigration status of residents is checked. He votes to allow guns in federal housing.

"We have a constitutional right to bear arms," he said after the committee hearing. "We should honor the second amendment."

He calls himself a "Main Street Democrat," Democrats who are not as conservative as the "Blue Dogs" -- but they don't want to be seen as liberal. Adler wants to be known as someone in the center, and he uses words like "center" or "middle" frequently.

"Middle class families and small businesses are being hurt," said Adler, a Harvard-educated lawyer whose father owned a dry-cleaning store but lost it after he became ill. "I'm concerned about the growth of government and the growth of taxes -- the middle class feels insecure."

To be stuck in the middle isn't always easy. Adler still hasn't made up his mind about the health care bill -- he said he wants to expand coverage, but doesn't want to vote to increase the deficit.

Adler even found some significance in his central position in age. "I am right at dead center," said the 49-year-old Adler. "I am exactly the median age of members of this Congress' freshman class."

In meetings with New Jersey realtors and insurance company executives, Adler expresses the same attitude -- whatever they're promoting, he's for it, if it helps the middle class. With the realtors, for example, he promises to oppose changes to income tax deductions for real estate taxes and mortgage interest.

He frequently votes for amendments that cut spending and his press secretary, Kathryn Prael -- one of few veterans on staff -- ensures his cost-cutting votes get attention. For example, while he voted for \$163 billion in spending for the labor, education, and health and human services departments, Prael, who worked for New York Congressman and city mayoral hopeful Anthony Weiner -- added this line at the end of her release:

"In addition, Congressman Adler voted for an amendment to cut \$803 million in excessive spending from the bill. Committed to fiscal responsibility, Congressman Adler has been the only New Jersey Democrat to vote against numerous spending bills and to cut more than \$50.9

billion out of the federal budget."

Only once does Adler concede his positions might be related to elections -- and the reference is indirect. After calling to congratulate newly-elected council members in towns in his district, Adler says he feels obliged not to depart too far from positions taken by Saxton, the Republican who held the seat for 26 years.

"Mr. Saxton voted against the party line when he was here, so I think they expect me to vote against the party line, too," Adler said.

Like other South Jersey congressmen, Adler emphasizes military and veterans' issues and his seat on the House Veterans Affairs Committee gave him an opportunity for visibility when published reports revealed that scores of patients at the Veterans' Administration hospital in Philadelphia received botched treatments for prostate cancer. He went after what he called "an outrageous lack of accountability."

A public committee hearing was postponed when a key witness declined to show, so Adler demanded his own meeting with federal veterans' affairs officials. He got the meeting, but, despite his wishes, it was closed to the press.

"They said they saw the light," Adler said after the closed-door session. "They promised much more accountability." He got a chance later to question veterans' officials at a rescheduled public hearing.

Adler also pushes for equal pay for military and civilian employees at the newly merged military base in South Jersey that includes McGuire Air Force Base, Fort Dix, and Lakehurst Naval Air Station. Some are paid on a New York-based scale, while others are paid according to Philadelphia cost of living data.

"It's bad for morale," he said.

His work for the military puts him in frequent touch with Col. Gina Grasso, a commander at the joint McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst base. Adler tells her he will fight for construction priorities at her base.

"I love this country and want to keep it safe and free," he said in one call to her.

It comes on a day when he makes many calls. To the mayor of Moorestown, so he can announce federal money for a history project in the town's schools. Adler says, "You should bask in good news when you can, because there's a lot of darkness out there."

He called an Ocean County health official to assure him he will work to get flu vaccine to seniors. He called Michael Moriarty, acting regional director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to make sure Medford Lakes gets \$1.9 million for repairs to the towns dams, sewers, and roads.

The calls don't stop until well after the officials he tries to reach have gone home for the day. Adler looks at the schedule he didn't pursue that afternoon so he could stay in his office and

make them. He looks at Greco and smiles.

"I really feel bad the controller of the currency didn't get to meet me," he said.